

# Decolonization of knowledge in African Academic Institutions

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## Abstract

*Paradoxically, academic partnerships between scholars of the North and the South can help epistemological decolonization. These partnerships can introduce African and can be instrumental in capacity building. Decolonization of knowledge does not mean abandoning Western knowledge. It means acquiring and generating knowledge with an African perspective and with African problems in mind. Knowledge cannot be pursued in a vacuum; it has to be built on the existing foundations. This is as true in humanities and social sciences as it is in hard sciences, where there can be no such thing as African physics or African mathematics. Previously studies looked at Africa from a Eurocentric perspective and if there were any African collaborators, their contribution was secondary, and this relationship between the partners was anything but equal. Currently a change in the nature of the collaborations is apparent. This is the result of the improved capacity of African academic institutions, globalization of knowledge and the explosion of the means of communication. Despite the fact that most funding still comes from the North, the African academics in these partnerships are now in a much better position to effect a balance in what is studied and disseminated.*

## Introduction

Recently there has been a greater awareness among academics in Africa about the need to decolonize knowledge. A catalyst has been the movement labelled “Rhodes Must Fall” in South Africa. This movement burst onto the scene in 2015 in the University of Cape Town. The students spearheading this movement aimed to highlight the continuing effects of the colonial legacy and the colonized mindset among university academics and administrators. An immediate goal was to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes from the University campus (Matebeni, 2018)

That goal was accomplished but the broader debate about dismantling insidious vestiges of the apartheid era, particularly the colonized mindset of African academics continues. Despite the recent improvements, the mode and content of university instructions in Africa generally is still Eurocentric. Problems relevant to African societies still get only superficial attention. Most research funding for collaborative research still comes from the global North, as a result of which the African partner in the team has a subordinate role in what is researched and to what end. For decolonization of African universities an integrated approach is needed. This will necessarily entail decolonization of the mind and indeed society at large, starting from young age. The following steps will be needed.

- A thoroughly revised curriculum of studies that de-emphasizes and counteracts Eurocentrism in education. At present any account of the contribution to human knowledge made by non-white, non-Europeans is totally missing from school syllabi.
- African philosophy, culture and tradition need to be made a prominent part of education.
- An academic approach where problems of African society take centre stage, where research topics are chosen that have relevance to the lives of Africans. All collaborative research done in partnership with scholars from the North should have the problems of African societies as their focus.

## What Decolonization of knowledge does not mean

A necessary step in the decolonization exercise is to make it clear that knowledge has universality, and there can be no African physics or African chemistry. Knowledge may have been developed in any country by people of any race, but it has to be appraised on its own merit and not on the basis of who developed it. A distinction has to be made between knowledge

and its relevance to a society, between its fundamental principles and how and where it is applied. Thus no rational person would advocate discarding all the corpus of science or psychology on the grounds of it having been developed by white European males. This would have seemed too obvious to state, if it were not being actually advocated during the Rhodes Must Fall movement. A YouTube video discussing this point of view has been viewed over a million times (Scientist, 2018).

## Decolonization of the African mind

Liberating the mind is a necessary prerequisite for the decolonization of knowledge in African universities. There is a mystique surrounding whites in many African minds. That this mystique exists is easy to understand, when one considers that many Africans while growing up encounter images, pictures and statues of a white deity, angels and saints. By the time students enter university the minds of many of them have been firmly molded.

The predominance of the knowledge originating from European scholars and scientists and imparted in universities anywhere is an established fact, but it needs to be remembered that this advance was not built in a vacuum. School curriculum needs to be reformed to include history of science, particularly the contributions of non-Europeans to scientific knowledge. These contributions include many by scholars from the African continent. When Europe was going through the dark ages, science was very much alive in Africa. Timbuktu in present day Mali was an important centre of learning and scholarship, where millions of manuscripts were produced. Ibn Khaldun of North Africa developed theories of history and founded the academic field of sociology. These and many other facts hardly find a mention in academic curriculum in African universities (Murfin, 1992).

While it is well known that humans began their journey from Africa, all subsequent development in the continent are ignored while imparting education in schools. One of the premier achievements of Africans was the domestication of wild cattle. Wild cattle were domesticated in Africa earlier than most other places in the world. According to some studies, cattle were domesticated in Chad 9000 years ago. It's, however, thought that in Africa cultivation of plants started later than other regions primarily as a result of an abundance of wild grain in the continent (Vaughn, 2018). Rice farming in West Africa also stands out (Carney, 2001). One of the earliest civilizations sprang from Africa. Egyptian

civilization achieved monumental accomplishments in architecture, engineering, writing, medicine, irrigation, agriculture and art. The legacy of ancient Egyptian civilization has had a lasting effect on civilizations following it. African students should be familiarized with the achievements of this civilization and its place in the history of the world.

The contribution of Africa to the advancement of humans is not limited to the Egyptian civilization. There were other significant advances. Magnificent Coptic churches in Ethiopia and mosques in several African countries testify to advancement in architecture. Several of these buildings are now UNESCO heritage sites. Textile technology was indigenously developed in several African regions. Cotton was used to weave fabric in Western Africa and in Great Zimbabwe, long before direct trade with Europeans (Picton, 2005; Davison & Harries (2018). The traveler Ibn Batuta visited Moghadishu, present day Somalia, in 1331, and recorded that the city was noted for its high quality fabric that was exported to other countries (Metz, 1992).

Iron technology existed in ancient Africa. African blacksmiths knew how to produce high temperatures in their furnaces two thousand years ago. (Diamond, 1997).

Astronomy is another field in which African societies made considerable advances. In Mali, the Dogon had knowledge of the solar system as far back as the early fourteenth century. They knew about the star Sirius B, the companion star to Sirius A, and invisible to the naked eye. (Finch, 1998, Sertima, 2007)

In addition to the well-known cases of Egyptian expertise in architecture, mathematics and engineering among others, the Malians' knowledge of astronomy, is well documented. Africans made contributions to the fields of biology, chemistry, medicine, metallurgy, and natural products (Claxton, 2011).

At present little is known about Africa's contribution to the world's civilization even in Africa. The reason is that history, as taught in Africa, was written by non-Africans. This is despite the fact that an African, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) is considered to be the father of historiography, in addition to sociology and economics. As a result of westernized syllabi of African universities, few students there know about the great Historian.

The Philosopher of History, Robert Finch said of Ibn Khaldun: "As a theorist on history he had no equal in any age or country until Vico appeared, more than three hundred years later. Plato, Aristotle and Augustine were not his peers . . ." (Zeleva, 2017) The twentieth century English historian Arnold Toynbee went further and described Ibn-Khaldun's massive work the *Muqaddimah*, (an introduction to history), as "a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place," (Zeleva, 2017).

If decolonization of minds is to succeed, African students need to be informed of the contribution that their continent has made to the world civilization.

### **Decolonization and North-South Academic Partnerships**

In addition to decolonization of minds, another necessary step would be to look at partnership between the global North and South in academic research. In a study of collaboration pattern, it was found that from 2007 to 2011 a total of 29 African countries were identified to have published more than 90% of their articles in collaboration with authors from other countries. Most of these collaborators were from developed countries. This shows

a dependence on foreign resources (Pouris 2012).

Research collaboration funded by the North is where unequal partnership between African scientists and their collaborators from the developed countries is stark. It is also where decolonization is most needed. The choice of topics of the collaborative research is revealing. Most of the published research papers as a result of collaboration between the scientists from the North and African academics are in the fields of medicine (tropical medicine, parasitology and infectious diseases) and natural resources (biodiversity, water resources, entomology, and mining, among others). These are the fields for which Africa is a rich source of data, and it is not surprising that that is where most of the research funding coming from the North goes. If the African collaborators in the partnership had a greater say in choice of topics, one would expect more emphasis on public health, disease prevention, appropriate technology, human resource development, and poverty alleviation.

An important goal in any partnership should be to build capacity of the African institution involved. Once the standing of the African partner is enhanced, it would be much easier to have a more significant role in the partnership. It is legitimate for the African partners in these collaborative teams to seek a greater role in the choice of the topics and in giving a direction to the research work that has relevance to the African society.

Capacity of African academic institutions is improving. This factor, in addition to globalization of knowledge and better and faster means of communication are responsible for a gradual change in the nature of partnership between African scholars and those from the North. Most of the funding still comes from the North but the African academics are in a better position to effect the course of the collaborative research and guide it towards more relevance to African problems. (Moalosi & Ahmad, 2018).

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